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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000145

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SUBJECT: ARMENIA: PRE-ELECTION TOUR OF ARAGATZOTN REGION

REF: A. YEREVAN 144

- 1B. YEREVAN 140
- 1C. YEREVAN 127
- 1D. YEREVAN 125
- 1E. YEREVAN 123
- 1F. YEREVAN 118

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (B/D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) While characterizing the pre-election campaigning as "routine to date," governmental, non-governmental, political party and international observers in the Aragatzotn region of Armenia nevertheless highlighted a growing undercurrent of widely suspected fraud, particularly vote buying, in the final days of campaigning before Armenia's February 19 Presidential Election. Though the district is a stronghold of support for the ruling Republican Party, if what interlocutors tell us is true, ruling party supporters seem to be taking no chances in ushering in a resounding victory for Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Though only thirty minutes from Yerevan, the Aragatzotn region is the most rural of Armenia's eleven regions. The region, constituting nearly ten percent of the nation's territory, is home to less than five percent of its population. Once a center of science in Soviet Armenia, Aragatzotn is now known for its agriculture production and animal husbandry.

¶3. (U) Talin, the region's second largest city, was a focal point of electoral intrigue during the 2007 parliamentary elections. Site of one of the few recounts and run-offs following an extremely tight race, Talin was scene to one of the most widely publicized instances of campaign violence in the run up to the Presidential election.

¶4. (U) Emboffs visited the region February 13 and conducted meetings in the city of Talin with Hovhannes Asatrian, Territorial Electoral Commission (TEC) #15 Chairman, Hayk Atanesian, campaign chairman for former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan (LTP), and OSCE/ODIHR long term observer Richard Lappin. Officers also traveled to the regional capital of Ashtarak and met with Razmik Terterian, the regional campaign chairman for the Orinats Yerkir Party, Siraznik Hovsepian, regional coordinator of the NGO "Its Your Choice," and Ashtarak Mayor Gagik Tamazian.

TALIN: PUT UP YOUR DUKEs

¶ 15. (C) Hovhannes Asatrian, the Chairman of Talin's Territorial Electoral Commission (TEC) #15, noted that elections in his district have improved dramatically since he began his tenure in August 2003. Highlighting improvements in transparency, the electoral code, and the technical aspects of transmitting results to Yerevan, Asatrian characterized the presidential campaigning to date as routine and forecast a clean election on February 19. Asatrian brushed aside any perception that Talin's runoff following the 2007 parliamentary election, one of the few in the country, was anything more than a losing candidate's unwillingness to concede the race after losing by 166 votes from 17,000 cast. The runoff was necessary, Asatrian said, when the victorious Republican candidate, his victory confirmed by a recount, resigned citing the desire for a "decisive mandate" from the people. The Republican was victorious in the August 26 runoff, this time by a margin of some 6,000 votes. (NOTE: Though the run-off was not subject to international observation, and the local diplomatic corps was likewise denied accreditations to observe, leaving a process we believe was notably less clean and transparent than the original election in May 2007. END NOTE)

¶ 16. (C) Hayk Atanesian, Talin campaign manager for former President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP), recounted in vivid detail the highly publicized local instance of campaign violence. On January 28, said Atanesian, "provocateurs" supporting Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian caused a disturbance prior to an LTP rally. Admitting that "battery took place," four members of LTP's regional coordination board were arrested; three remain in jail pending administrative action. Atanesian claimed that, unlike the Republican party rally by the Prime Minister on February 12, police presence at the

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5,000-person strong LTP rally was minimal, two "public TV" cameras were filming the square prior to the start of the event, and the Deputy Head of the local National Security Service office personally escorted the "provocateurs" to the rally, and then was later witnessed informing superiors that the provocation had occurred. These actions, he said, demonstrated to the local populace that they are "living in a dictatorship." Should the Republicans win, Atanesian said he expected the administrative charges to be dropped against his LTP colleagues and the men released.

¶ 17. (C) Atanesian believes that the only way the Republican Party will carry Talin is if the various electoral commissions falsify the tally. In support of his contention, he detailed the demographics of the participants at the Republican Party's rally in the town square on February 12. Noting that some 50 Mercedes buses and hundreds of cars brought supporters from outside Aragatzotn to the event, Atanesian said that the only local supporters attending the event were several hundred adolescent boys. Highlighting the disparity in campaign resources, Atanesian appeared to take some pride in the fact that the Republicans, for all of their imported talent, could barely muster a crowd of 3,000.

ASHTARAK: 20 DOLLARS A VOTE

¶ 18. (C) The regional Artur Baghdassarian (Orinats Yerkir party) campaign manager Razmik Terterian characterized the ruling party's efforts as straightforward bribery. He said that following PM Sargsian's February 12 visit, the ruling party's campaigners began distributing 6,000 AMD (roughly USD 20) per voter to buy support on Election Day. In the one evening between Sargsian's rally and EmbOffs' visit, Terterian said, some 7,000 people had already received bribes. Reflecting the agrarian nature of the region, Terterian said that some supporters were distributing insecticide to voters in lieu of cash. Terterian, who said

his party received support from Ashtarak's intellectuals and youth, alleged that bribe distributors will ask voters to mark their ballots with differently colored pens to allow party observers to enforce and check voting discipline on February 19.

¶9. (C) Terterian also detailed a litany of other ruling party electoral tactics that he said are meant to drive support to the Republican candidate. He said 200 vehicles will travel to Nagorno-Karabakh on Election Day and return deployed soldiers from the Aragatzotn region home to vote. He also noted that a senior executive in Yerevan's power industry who originally hails from Aragatzotn asked that individuals from his home village re-register in Yerevan so he may better ensure party discipline in support of the Republican Party. Terterian said there were reports that Territorial Election Commission Chairmen were to receive a bounty of USD 10,000 if they could "deliver" at least a 60 percent vote in favor of Sargsian.

¶10. (C) Terterian noted that the mayor's office controlled the location of campaign advertising in Ashtarak. Though the mayor had "created no problems" for the parties on this matter, Terterian stated that it was widely known that the mayor had "ordered his staff" to vote for Sargsian.

THE MAYOR: "APOLITICAL" BUT ISN'T MY SARGSIAN BUST COOL?!

¶11. (C) Ashtarak Mayor Gagik Tamazian, who pulled up late to the meeting in a new Mercedes sedan with heavily tinted windows, told us that he had gotten into politics two years ago after spending ten years in Moscow in the construction industry. Tamazian appeared eager to repeatedly note that he had no party affiliation, and had said as much in a recently published article. EmbOffs took note that a large campaign poster promoting Sargsian was taped to the wall underneath the seal of Armenia behind the mayor's desk, and that 2008 Republican Party wall calendars were stacked on the table in front of his desk. The mayor's office occupied a wing of the second floor of the city hall building. Ashtarak Republican Party Headquarters was on the first floor of the same wing, directly below. A 30-yard long banner proclaiming "Ashtarak Supports Serzh Sargsian" could be seen fluttering from the mayor's office over the town's main square. A large Republican Party campaign poster was prominently displayed on the front wall of the municipality building.

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NGO NONPLUSSED BY FRAUD RUMORS

¶12. (C) Siraznik Hovsepian, regional coordinator of the NGO "Its Your Choice" noted that his watchdog organization has received "no alarming" calls regarding electoral tomfoolery. He affirmed, however, that there had been a recent spike in rumors regarding vote buying.

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS: SMOKE BUT NO FIRE...YET

¶13. (C) OSCE long term observer Richard Lappin (U.K.) told us that he and his partner have to date received no credible cases of electoral fraud in the region. He affirmed, however, that the rumors of vote buying were getting louder as Election Day approaches. Noting that many Aragatzotn residents leave Armenia to take up seasonal work in Russia, Lappin believed that voter list discrepancies presented the most opportunity for fraud. All interlocutors gave the observer team high marks for diligence; the team had visited everyone that EmbOffs spoke with at least twice.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) The tenor, tone, and rumored misdeeds of the campaign differed in significantly negative ways from our impressions when we visited before the May 2007 election. Interlocutors had then told us that President Kocharian's office was heavily involved in promoting a "No Fraud" election; no such message seems to have been given for this election cycle. Interlocutors at that time told us that the 2007 vote was as much about reducing fraud -- fearing the loss of Millennium Challenge, Lincy Foundation and World Bank monies -- as it was about ushering in a Republican majority in parliament. The import of Western reaction to this vote, it seems, at least in Aragatzotn is less important than ensuring victory for Serzh Sargsian. END COMMENT.

PENNINGTON